

# Hermeneutical Injustice

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Rebecca Mason, University of San Francisco

## 1. Introduction

This paper defends a novel analysis of a phenomenon that Miranda Fricker calls *hermeneutical injustice*. In sections 2 and 3, I identify two distinct definitions of hermeneutical injustice supplied by Fricker in her groundbreaking book *Epistemic Injustice: Ethics and the Power of Knowing* (2007). I argue that it is not obvious how these definitions are related, or how to resolve the discrepancy between them. I defend an alternative, recursive definition of hermeneutical injustice and argue that it is more ideologically parsimonious and has greater explanatory power than either of Fricker's definitions. I conclude by distinguishing hermeneutical injustice from closely related phenomena such as *white ignorance* (Mills 1997, 2007, 2017), *willful hermeneutical ignorance* (Pohlhaus 2012), and *contributory injustice* (Dotson 2012).

## 2. First Definition of Hermeneutical Injustice

In *Epistemic Injustice: Ethics and the Power of Knowing*, Miranda Fricker offers two distinct definitions of hermeneutical injustice. She introduces the first definition of hermeneutical injustice in conjunction with her discussion of Carmita Wood, who, according to Fricker, is unable to properly understand or describe her experience of workplace mistreatment because she lacks the concept SEXUAL

HARASSMENT. In her discussion of this case, Fricker defines hermeneutical injustice as

the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource. (2007, 155)

However, Fricker offers very few clarifying remarks about the above definition. First, she does not explain what it means to say that someone's social experience is "obscured from collective understanding." Second, she does not explain what hermeneutical resources are, or what makes them collective. Third, Fricker does not give an account of the nature of "structural identity prejudice." I will address each of these elements in turn.

Let us say that someone's social experience is "obscured from collective understanding" when most people (which may include the person who has the experience in question) do not understand the nature or normative significance of that experience. For example, in the 1970s, most people did not understand the nature or normative significance of subjecting women to unwanted sexual advances at work. In particular, most people did not understand that subjecting women to unwanted sexual advances at work constitutes a form of wrongful and harmful harassment (not flirting). Thus, women's experiences of being sexually harassed were obscured from collective understanding.

Similarly, until very recently, most people did not understand the nature or normative significance of women's experiences of extreme sadness, mood swings, intense irritability, hopelessness, anxiety and low energy following childbirth. In

particular, most people did not understand that those experiences constitute a physiological condition and are not something for which women are morally blameworthy. Thus, women's experiences postpartum depression were obscured from collective understanding.

Next, we need to clarify the nature of the collective hermeneutical resource. Let's say that hermeneutical resources are the cognitive and linguistic tools (i.e., concepts and words) that we use to understand the world and to communicate with one another about it. For example, the concept SEXUAL HARASSMENT and the corresponding term "sexual harassment" are hermeneutical resources. They enable us to think and talk about sexual harassment. According to Fricker, prior to the 1970s, the concept SEXUAL HARASSMENT and the corresponding term "sexual harassment" did not belong to the collective hermeneutical resource. On her view, this is why women's experiences of being sexually harassed were obscured from collective understanding.

In virtue of what do some concepts and words belong (or fail to belong) to the collective hermeneutical resource? In later work, Fricker says that the collective hermeneutical resource includes "meanings that just about anyone can draw upon and expect those meanings to be understood across social space by just about anyone else. The collective hermeneutical resource contains those concepts and conceptualizations that are held *in common*" (Fricker 2016, 163 *emphasis in original*). In other words, some concepts and terms belong to the collective hermeneutical

resource if and only if the majority of people possess those concepts and are competent with the terms that are used to express them.<sup>1</sup>

Lastly, we need to clarify the nature of structural identity prejudice, and how the collective hermeneutical resource instantiates it. Identity prejudice, according to Fricker, is a property of individuals. In particular, identity prejudice characterizes someone's beliefs or judgments (2007, 35). Fricker argues that "prejudices are judgments, which may have a positive or a negative valence, and which display some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence owing to some affective investment on the part of the subject" (35). On her account, *negative* identity prejudice produces testimonial injustice. A negative identity prejudice is a prejudice "with a negative valence held against people *qua* social type" (35). For example, someone's belief that women are not reliable testifiers exhibits negative identity prejudice.

Given this characterization of identity prejudice, however, it is not at all clear what it means to say that the collective hermeneutical resource instantiates *structural* identity prejudice, except to suggest, rather obliquely, that the structural variety of identity prejudice is non-agential. Fricker says that the collective

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<sup>1</sup> Fricker acknowledges that the collective hermeneutical resource "will surely not exhaust all the various up and running sets of social meanings that are being used locally by this or that group in a given society" (2016, 163). Thus, her account allows for the possibility that members of marginalized social groups may have concepts and terms which enable them to understand and describe their experiences, but which do not belong to the collective hermeneutical resource because they are not shared by everyone. See Goetz (2018) for a more fine-grained taxonomy of hermeneutical resources.

hermeneutical resource is structurally prejudiced when it supplies interpretations of a group's social experiences that are biased (2007, 155) and that these biased interpretations are caused by "persistent and wide-ranging hermeneutical marginalization" (155). However, besides giving a few sketchy examples, she does not develop an account of what it is for the collective hermeneutical resource to be biased due to hermeneutical marginalization. Thus, the nature of structural identity prejudice remains opaque on Fricker's account.

However, Fricker's second definition of hermeneutical injustice makes no mention of structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource, and it is that definition to which I turn in the next section.

### 3. Second Definition of Hermeneutical Injustice

So much for Fricker's first definition of hermeneutical injustice. Fricker provides a second definition of hermeneutical injustice only a few pages after the first, this time in the context of her discussion of a case of hermeneutical injustice involving a character named Joe from Ian McEwan's novel *Enduring Love*. Fricker's second definition of hermeneutical injustice, unlike the first, does not make reference to the collective hermeneutical resource or to structural identity prejudice. Instead, it invokes the phenomenon of hermeneutical marginalization, which is not included in Fricker's first definition of hermeneutical injustice.

Fricker states that her second definition of hermeneutical injustice is a “generic” one that defines hermeneutical injustice “per se” (2007, 158). According to the generic definition, hermeneutical injustice is

The injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization. (2007, 158)

In other words, a subject, S, suffers hermeneutical injustice when most people fail to understand the nature of S’s social experiences because S belongs to a social group, G, that is hermeneutically marginalized.

According to Fricker, a social group is hermeneutically marginalized when members of that group, *in virtue of their membership in that group*, are unable to participate equally in those social institutions and practices through which hermeneutical resources are generated and publicized, e.g., government, law, journalism, and academia. As a result, members of these groups are unable to participate equally in the creation and dissemination of hermeneutical resources (i.e., by constructing legislation and social policy, creating media content, producing scholarly research, etc.).

Though Fricker’s first and second definitions of hermeneutical injustice are related, they are nonetheless distinct. According to the first definition, but not the second, hermeneutical injustice essentially involves structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource. Let’s call Fricker’s first definition of hermeneutical injustice “HI-1.” According to the second definition, but not the first,

hermeneutical injustice is essentially caused by hermeneutical marginalization. Let's call Fricker's second definition of hermeneutical injustice "HI-2."

This is not to say that there is no connection between HI-1 and HI-2. To the contrary, hermeneutical marginalization is supposed to cause structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource. However, this does not resolve this discrepancy between the first and second definition of hermeneutical injustice. It remains the case that there is more than one definition of hermeneutical injustice on offer, and that Fricker has not provided a clear explanation of how we should understand the relationship between them.

However, given that Fricker describes the second definition of hermeneutical injustice as *generic*, one possibility is that HI-1 is a species of HI-2. The genus-species relation is traditionally understood in conjunctive terms; that is, in terms of a conjunction of a generic property and one or more differentia, i.e., properties that differentiate the species. In other words, a species, *s*, is defined by a generic property, *F*-ness, and those properties,  $G_1...G_n$ , (the differentia) that distinguish *s* from other species of *F*. For example, the species *triangle* belongs to the genus *polygon*. The generic property that differentiates triangles from other species of polygons (e.g., pentagon, hexagon, chiliagon) is the property of being three-sided. Thus, a triangle is a three-sided polygon; a pentagon is a five-sided polygon; a hexagon is a six-sided polygon, etc. What each species of the genus polygon has in common is the property that defines their genus, viz., the property of being a plane figure that is bounded by a finite, closed chain of straight-line segments; what

differentiates the various species of polygons from one another is the number of straight-line segments by which they are bounded.

HI-1 and HI-2 have a property in common which could serve as the generic property, viz., having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding. Moreover, HI-1 has a property that differentiates it from HI-2; in particular, it has the property of being produced by structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource. However, HI-1 is not a species of HI-2 because HI-2 also has a property that differentiates it from HI-1. In particular, it has the property of being produced by hermeneutical marginalization. Therefore, HI-1 and HI-2 do not stand in the genus-species relation.

There is more than one way to proceed at this point. First, it is possible that these definitions are related in some other way that I have not considered. Second, the discrepancy between them could be avoided if we were to reject one definition in favor of the other. However, in sections 4 and 5, I pursue a third strategy. Specifically, I develop an alternative definition of hermeneutical injustice. I argue my definition is more ideologically parsimonious than either of Fricker's because it does not rely on the notions of *structural identity prejudice* or *hermeneutical marginalization*.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it has greater explanatory power. This gives us a reason to prefer my definition of hermeneutical injustice over either of Fricker's definitions.

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<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as Alexander Prescott-Couch persuasively argues, there are serious problems with any theory that grounds hermeneutical injustice in either identity prejudice or hermeneutical marginalization. In particular, he argues that "facts about the causal origin of hermeneutic disadvantage that are not the only facts relevant to hermeneutic injustice" (14).

## 4. Hermeneutical Injustice Redefined

In this section, I defend an alternative definition of hermeneutical injustice and argue that is preferable to Fricker's because it is more ideologically parsimonious. In particular, it does not require an account of either structural identity prejudice or hermeneutical marginalization.

I begin by stating two necessary conditions which aim to capture the salient features of Fricker's central case of hermeneutical injustice, i.e., Carmita Wood. A subject, *S*, suffers hermeneutical injustice only if

- (i) *S* is unable to understand the nature or normative significance of their social experience, *e*, or
- (ii) *S* is unable to describe the nature or normative significance of *e* in a way that most people can understand.<sup>3</sup>

Wood was unable to understand or to describe the nature and normative significance of her experience of being sexually harassed at work in a way that most other people could understand. When Wood tried to explain why she had quit her job, she "was at a loss to describe the hateful episodes" (Brownmiller 1999, 280-281). Thus, Carmita Wood's case satisfies (ii).

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<sup>3</sup> This is what Luvell Anderson calls a "hermeneutical impasse."

Though (i) and (ii) are necessary for hermeneutical injustice, they are not sufficient. This is because it is possible for (i) or (ii) to be satisfied in a way that is not unjust. Consider the following case: Jeff is the wealthy founder, CEO and President of a multi-national corporation. Jeff regularly enjoys dining at Michelin Star restaurants where he drinks expensive wines with each course of his meal. After a particularly enjoyable dinner one night, however, he finds himself unable to describe, in a way that most other people can understand, “that *je ne sais quoi* of drinking a particular expensive wine at a lavish dinner” (Prescott-Couch 5). Thus, Jeff satisfies (ii). That is, Jeff is unable to describe his social experience of drinking a particular wine at a lavish dinner in such a way that most other people can understand. However, his inability to do so is not unjust.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, the definition of hermeneutical injustice needs to include a condition that specifies that the satisfaction of conditions (i) or (ii) constitutes hermeneutical injustice only if they are satisfied due to injustice.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the definition of hermeneutical injustice needs to include a recursive condition specifying that someone is subject to hermeneutical injustice only if the first or second condition is satisfied in a way that constitutes injustice:

- (i) S is unable to understand the nature or normative significance of their social experience, *e*, or

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<sup>4</sup> This case is borrowed from Alexander Prescott-Couch, “Hermeneutic Injustice and the Public Sphere” (ms.).

<sup>5</sup> I will remain neutral on whether the injustice must be distinctively epistemic in nature.

- (ii) S is unable to describe the nature or normative significance of *e* in a way that most people can understand, and
- (iii) The satisfaction of conditions (i) or (ii) is unjust.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a comprehensive account of when the satisfaction of (i) or (ii) constitutes injustice. I am inclined to think that there is more than one way of doing so, and that philosophers with different conceptions of justice may disagree about what makes the satisfaction of either of the first two conditions unjust. Perhaps (iii) is satisfied when someone is unfairly prevented from understanding or articulating the nature or normative significance of their inchoate social experiences.<sup>6</sup> However, unfairness need not be the only reason why the satisfaction of (i) or (ii) constitutes injustice. To the contrary, it is possible that different cases in which (i) or (ii) are satisfied may be unjust for different reasons.

The addition of condition (iii) in the above definition yields the desired result that Jeff, the wealthy CEO, does not suffer hermeneutical injustice when he finds that he cannot describe the “*je ne sais quoi*” of drinking a particular expensive wine, for the ineffability of Jeff’s experience is not plausibly unjust. However, (i)-(iii) still do not state necessary and sufficient conditions for hermeneutical injustice. To see why, consider a case in which (ii) is satisfied because S is physically gagged. In that case, S is unable to describe the nature or normative significance of her social experiences in a way that *anyone* can understand, for the gag makes her speech

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<sup>6</sup> See Prescott-Couch (2020) for an account along these lines.

incomprehensible. Moreover, suppose that it is unjust that S is physically gagged. In that case, (iii) is satisfied as well. However, intuitively, this is not an instance of *hermeneutical* injustice.

To avoid this result, I argue that a fourth condition should be added to the definition of hermeneutical injustice; in particular, I argue that someone suffers hermeneutical injustice only if (i) or (ii) are satisfied because the collective hermeneutical resource is *deficient* or *distorted*.

## 5. Deficits and Distortions in the Collective Hermeneutical Resource

According to Fricker, instances of hermeneutical injustice have a common etiology. In particular, she argues hermeneutical injustice is always caused by “a paucity of shared concepts” (2016, 170). For example, according to Fricker, Carmita Wood was subject to hermeneutical injustice because the collective hermeneutical resource did not contain the concept of SEXUAL HARASSMENT, or the corresponding term. Similarly, she argues that Wendy Sanford was unable to understand the nature and normative significance of her experience because the concept of POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION was not widely shared. Thus, according to Fricker, hermeneutical injustice occurs only if the collective hermeneutical resource is *deficient*.

In light of this, one might argue that the definition of hermeneutical injustice should be amended so that a subject, S, suffers hermeneutical injustice if and only if

- (i) S is unable to understand the nature or normative significance of their social experience, *e*, or
- (ii) S is unable to describe the nature or normative significance of *e* in a way that most people can understand, and
- (iii) Conditions (i) or (ii) are satisfied because the collective hermeneutical resource is deficient, and
- (iv) The satisfaction of conditions (i) or (ii) and (iii) is unjust.

This definition yields the desired result that individuals who are unjustly gagged or otherwise prevented from speaking do not suffer hermeneutical injustice, for, although they are unable to describe the nature or normative significance of their social experiences, they are not unable to do so *because the collective hermeneutical resource is deficient*.

However, although the cases of hermeneutical injustice involving Carmita Wood and Wendy Sanford arise from gaps in the collective hermeneutical resource, Fricker also considers a case of hermeneutical injustice that is not produced by conceptual impoverishment—that of the anonymous protagonist in Edmund White’s autobiographical novel, *A Boy’s Own Story*.

In White’s novel, the unnamed protagonist struggles to make sense of his nascent homosexual desires. The boy describes his bewilderment as follows:

I never doubted that homosexuality was a sickness; in fact, I took it as a measure of how unsparingly objective I was that I could contemplate this

very sickness. But in some other part of my mind I couldn't believe that the Lysol smell must bathe me, too, that its smell of stale coal fumes must penetrate my love for Tom. Perhaps I became so vague, so exhilarated with vagueness, precisely in order to forestall a recognition of the final term of the syllogism that begins: If one man loves another, he is a homosexual, I love a man... (White 1982, 117-118)

Here, the confusion the protagonist describes does not stem from the fact that he lacks the concept of HOMOSEXUALITY. He not only possesses the concept of HOMOSEXUALITY, that concept belongs to the collective hermeneutical resource. Thus, insofar as the protagonist in White's novel suffers hermeneutical injustice, it is not caused by "a paucity of shared concepts," as Fricker maintains.

Rather, what is going on in this case is that the young protagonist is reluctant to *apply* the shared concept of HOMOSEXUALITY to himself. Moreover, he is reluctant to do so because of the way in which homosexuality was understood at the time. In other words, the protagonist fails to understand his love for Tom as *homosexual* because he has internalized the descriptions of homosexuality as a "sickness" or a "stage," and, as a result, is loath to apply the concept of HOMOSEXUALITY to his feelings for Tom.

If hermeneutical injustice is always caused by conceptual deficiency, then this is not a case of hermeneutical injustice. However, intuitively, this is a case of hermeneutical injustice. Like Carmita Wood and Wendy Sanford, White's protagonist is not able to understand the nature and normative significance of a

particularly important social experience of his. Therefore, it is not the case that hermeneutical injustice is always caused by conceptual deficiency.

My view is that although some instances of hermeneutical injustice involve failures of concept *possession* (Wood and Sanford lacked the concepts of SEXUAL HARASSMENT and POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION respectively), others involve failures of concept *application*.<sup>7</sup> For example, the boy in White's novel possesses the concept he needs to understand his love for Tom, i.e., HOMOSEXUALITY. However, he finds himself unable to make sense of that experience because he is unwilling to apply that concept to himself given its pathological and heteronormative associations.

Cases such as these proliferate. In her book, *I Never Called it Rape*, Robin Warsaw (2019) recounts the experience of Lori, a college student who was raped by an acquaintance while on a date. Warsaw describes how Lori struggled to understand the nature and normative significance of this experience (i.e., that it was sexual assault and that it was not her fault but his). Indeed, she takes the name of her book from that experience: Lori never called it "rape" (at least not initially).

As Katharine Jenkins argues, women like Lori are often unable to understand the nature or normative significance of their experience of being raped by people they know (family, friends, spouses) due to prevalent myths about rape and domestic violence. Jenkins points out that "such myths function to obscure understandings of these phenomena including victims' understanding of their own

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<sup>7</sup> Simion (forthcoming) makes this point but for different reasons.

experiences” (2017, 192).<sup>8</sup> In particular, rape myths perpetuate the idea that rape is perpetrated by *strangers* (often *racialized* strangers) rather than friends, family members, or intimate partners.

Women like Lori possess the concept of RAPE. Indeed, that concept is widely shared; therefore, it belongs to the collective hermeneutical resource. Nonetheless, they fail to apply it to their experiences of sexual assault due to, e.g., the myth that rape is committed by strangers. Thus, women like Lori present another case of hermeneutical injustice involving a failure of concept application rather than a failure of concept possession.<sup>9</sup> A theory of hermeneutical injustice should capture cases such as these.

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<sup>8</sup> Jenkins (2017) lists several of these myths: “1. That rape always involves overwhelming physical force, and that victims of rape always physically resist their attacker. 2. That consent cannot be withdrawn part-way through a sexual act. 3. That consent is automatically present if a prior consensual sexual act between the same parties recently took place. 4 That rape is only committed by strangers and cannot occur within marriage/a relationship/a friendship. 5. That it is reasonable for someone to assume that another person consents to sex if that person acts or dresses in a way that is ‘sexually teasing’ or ‘sexually provocative’; or, that victims of rape who acted or dressed in a ‘sexually teasing’ or ‘sexually provocative’ way deserve to be raped” (192).

<sup>9</sup> Jenkins’ pursues a different diagnosis of this case. She stops short of questioning Fricker’s assertion that hermeneutical injustice always involves conceptual impoverishment. Instead, she argues that, though the relevant concepts are available in some sense (they are, for example, “enshrined in law and policy”) they may not be *accessible* to victims of intimate-partner and acquaintance rape. Jenkins pursues this line of argument because she fears that “otherwise, we would reach the conclusion that victims just fail to make use of resources they have at their disposal, and this comes uncomfortably close to victim-blaming” (195). I argue that feminists need not go in search of hermeneutical lacunae to avoid this unwelcome consequence.

To meet this desideratum, my view is that hermeneutical injustice can occur either because the collective hermeneutical resource is *deficient* or because it is *distorted*. For example, both Wood and Sanford failed to understand the nature and normative significance of their experiences because the collective hermeneutical resource did not include the concepts of SEXUAL HARASSMENT and POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION. These are examples of hermeneutical injustice that arise from deficits in the collective hermeneutical resource.

By contrast, in cases of hermeneutical injustice that arise from failures of concept application, subjects possess the requisite concepts but fail to apply them in ways that illuminate the nature and normative significance of their social experiences.<sup>10</sup> They fail to do so, I argue, because the collective hermeneutical resource is *distorted*. The protagonist in White's novel and women like Lori provide examples of hermeneutical injustice caused by distortions in the collective hermeneutical resource.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Maitra (2018) argues that sometimes the ways in which hermeneutical lacunae are filled in can produce distortions in the collective hermeneutical resource. She develops the idea of a distortion in a different way than I do here.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, another option is to maintain that hermeneutical injustice is always produced by conceptual deficiency, and therefore to deny that these are instances of hermeneutical injustice after all. However, my analysis seeks to vindicate the intuition that examples involving White's protagonist and Lori are instances of the phenomenon that an account of hermeneutical injustice aims to explain. Moreover, the insistence that hermeneutical injustice always involves conceptual deficiency appears to be unmotivated. As I argue in section 6, we need not appeal to conceptual impoverishment to distinguish hermeneutical injustice from closely related phenomena like white ignorance.

To understand how the collective hermeneutical resource can be distorted, we need a more refined understanding of it. Recall that hermeneutical resources are the cognitive and linguistic tools (i.e., concepts and words) that we use to understand the world and to communicate with one another about it, and that the *collective* hermeneutical resource is comprised of those concepts and terms that are shared by everyone. In what follows, I argue that the collective hermeneutical resource is not merely a jumble of words and concepts but also instantiates a structure.

This idea can be usefully clarified by adapting Katherine Ritchie's view of organized social groups (Ritchie 2013, 2015, forthcoming). According to Ritchie, organized social groups instantiate structures. On her view, structures are networks of nodes and edges: "Nodes represent positions or places that can be occupied by objects. Edges represent relations that hold between nodes (or node-occupiers)" (forthcoming, 4). She argues that nodes are occupied by people and edges represent relations between people, or between the nodes that they occupy.

Consider an organized social group like a baseball team.<sup>12</sup> On Ritchie's view, individual baseball teams are comprised of nodes, occupied by players, and relations between the nodes the players occupy. More specifically, baseball teams instantiate a structure which has nodes for *pitcher* and *catcher*. On the minor league baseball team the *Albuquerque Isotopes*, for example, the pitcher node is occupied by Logan

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<sup>12</sup> This example is adapted from Ritchie 2013, 2015 and forthcoming.

Cozart (among others) and the catcher node is occupied by Chris Rabago. As on any baseball team, those who occupy the catcher node are functionally related to those who occupy the pitcher by the *return the ball to* relation.

My suggestion is that the collective hermeneutical resource should be understood in an analogous way. In particular, the collective hermeneutical resource instantiates a structure comprised of nodes and edges. On Ritchie's view of organized social groups, the nodes are occupied by people. By contrast, on my view of the collective hermeneutical resource, the nodes are occupied by concepts and the terms we use to express them. The edges represent inferential relations among the concepts and terms which occupy the nodes. For example, the concept KOALA (and the corresponding term "koala") belongs to the collective hermeneutical resource and is inferentially related to other concepts such as ANIMAL and MARSUPIAL (along with the corresponding terms), which also belong to the collective hermeneutical resource.

Which relations the collective hermeneutical resource instantiates is determined by which concepts and terms belong to the collective hermeneutical resource, and the inferential dispositions of those individuals who rely on those concepts and terms to understand the world and communicate about it with one another. Let's say that the inferential relations instantiated by the collective hermeneutical resource are *thick* when very many people are disposed to make the relevant inferences. By contrast, the inferential relations instantiated by the

collective hermeneutical resource are *thin* when few people are disposed to make the relevant inferences.

Conceiving of the collective hermeneutical resource in this way enables me to explain how the collective hermeneutical resource can be distorted. On my view, the collective hermeneutical resource is distorted when the terms and concepts that comprise it are inferentially related in ways that are invalid or inductively weak. For example, in the 1950s, most people were disposed to infer ILLNESS, UNNATURAL, and DEVIANT from the concept of HOMOSEXUALITY. Therefore, at that time, the collective hermeneutical resource instantiated thick inferential relations between concepts such as HOMOSEXUALITY, ILLNESS, UNNATURAL, and DEVIANT. The collective hermeneutical resource was distorted because inferential relations between these concepts and terms are invalid (NB: someone's being a bachelor entails that they are unmarried, but someone's being homosexual does not imply that they have an illness). Similarly, very many people are disposed to infer STRANGER (rather than BOYFRIEND or HUSBAND) and RESISTANCE (rather than SUBMISSION) from the concept of RAPE. Therefore, the collective hermeneutical resource instantiates thick inferential relations between RAPE, STRANGER, and RESISTANCE and only thin inferential relations between RAPE and BOYFRIEND or HUSBAND. The thick inferential relations between RAPE, STRANGER, and RESISTANCE distort the collective hermeneutical resource because they are inductively weak: rape victims are much less likely to have been assaulted by a stranger than by a friend, family member or intimate partner.

When the collective hermeneutical resource is distorted in these ways, hermeneutical injustice arises not from a failure of concept possession but from a failure of concept application. Thus, though White's protagonist has the concept of HOMOSEXUALITY he does not apply it to his experience of loving Tom. As a result, he struggles to understand the nature and normative significance of his feelings. Similarly, though Lori has the concept of RAPE, she does not apply it to her experience of being sexually assaulted while on a date with an acquaintance. Thus, she struggles to understand the nature and normative significance of what happened to her.

Putting this all together, we can say that a subject, S, suffers hermeneutical injustice if and only if

- (i) S is unable to understand the nature or normative significance of their social experience, *e*, or
- (ii) S is unable to describe the nature or normative significance of *e* in a way that most people can understand, and
- (iii) Conditions (i) or (ii) are satisfied because the collective hermeneutical resource is deficient or distorted, and
- (iv) The satisfaction of conditions (i) or (ii), and (iii) is unjust.

This definition yields the desired result that the anonymous protagonist from White's novel and women like Lori suffer hermeneutical injustice even though these cases do not involve conceptual deficiency. Both Lori and White's protagonist are

unable understand the nature or normative significance of their social experiences not because the collective hermeneutical resource is deficient, but because it is distorted.

Finally, my definition of hermeneutical injustice is preferable to either of Fricker's definitions because it does not require an account of structural identity prejudice or hermeneutical marginalization. That is, my definition of hermeneutical injustice is more ideologically parsimonious than either of Fricker's definitions of that phenomenon. Moreover, it has more explanatory power insofar as it can account for a greater range of cases of hermeneutical injustice; in particular, it can account for cases such as those involving the protagonist from *A Boy's Own Story* and women like Lori. This gives us a *prima facie* reason to prefer my definition to either of Fricker's.

## 6. Hermeneutical Injustice and Related Phenomena

Before concluding, I would like to consider the question of how to distinguish hermeneutical injustice from related phenomena such as *white ignorance* (Mills 1997, 2007, 2017), *willful hermeneutical ignorance* (Pohlhaus 2012) and *contributory injustice* (Dotson 2012).

Fricker argues that hermeneutical injustice and white ignorance are distinct at least partly because the former but not the latter always involves conceptual

deficiency.<sup>13</sup> On her view, white ignorance “does not generally involve any paucity of concepts on anyone’s part” whereas in instances of hermeneutical injustice “there is always, definitively, a paucity of shared concepts” (Fricker 2016, 170). However, if hermeneutical injustice does not always arise from gaps in the collective hermeneutical resource, as I have argued, how should we distinguish white ignorance from hermeneutical injustice?

According to Charles Mills (1997, 2007, 2017), white ignorance is a form of non-accidental, racially motivated irrationality. Consider, for example, the persistent belief, despite considerable evidence to the contrary, that racial inequality in the United States is caused by a “culture of poverty” among Black Americans rather than by historical injustice (e.g., slavery, Jim Crow laws) and anti-Black racism. This, according to Mills, is an instance of white ignorance. That is, a cognitive dysfunction that occurs because individuals are unwilling to understand the ways in which the world and their place in it is structured by race and racial oppression.

On my view, white ignorance and hermeneutical injustice are distinct because white ignorance *causes* deficits and distortions in the collective

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<sup>13</sup> Fricker argues that another important difference between these phenomena is no agent is epistemically culpable for hermeneutical injustice. It is “a purely structural phenomenon with no individual perpetrator” (2016, 172). By contrast, she argues, in at least some cases, agents are culpable for perpetrating white ignorance: “such prejudiced cognizers are allowing some racist motive (perhaps racial contempt, or some kind of racial self-aggrandisement) to distort their perception of the social world and their place in it. Such motivated irrationality is plainly epistemically culpable” (172).

hermeneutical resource whereas hermeneutical injustice is *caused by* deficits and distortions in the collective hermeneutical resource. For example, one reason why the collective hermeneutical resource is deficient and distorted is that white people are unwilling to understand the ways in which the world and their place in it manifests racism and racial oppression. Thus, the collective hermeneutical resource instantiates thick inferential relations between the concepts of RACIAL INEQUALITY and BLACK CULTURE and comparatively thin inferential relations between RACIAL INEQUALITY, SLAVERY, and RACISM.

For the same reason, hermeneutical injustice is distinct from *willful hermeneutical ignorance* (Pohlhaus 2012) and *contributory injustice* (Dotson 2012). Willful hermeneutical ignorance occurs when members of dominant social groups dismiss or ignore the interpretive resources created by members of marginalized groups to conceptualize and describe their experiences (Pohlhaus 2012). For example, consider someone who dismisses or ignores concepts like GENDER IDENTITY or PANSEXUAL as used by members of the LGBTQIA+ community. *Contributory injustice* occurs when someone willfully refuses to use or even recognize alternative hermeneutical resources, and uses dominant, often ill-fitting ones instead (32). For example, consider someone who insists that racial disparities in college graduation rates is “meritocratic” and refuses to use the concept of STRUCTURAL RACISM to understand why Black and Hispanic college students are less likely to graduate than their White peers.

Like white ignorance, willful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice *produce and maintain* deficits and distortions in the collective hermeneutical resource, whereas hermeneutical injustice is *produced by* those deficits and distortions. For example, the collective hermeneutical resource will be deficient—and therefore liable to give rise to hermeneutical injustice—insofar as most people refuse to employ or recognize concepts and terminology created by members of the LGBTQIA+ community to understand and describe their experiences.

To put the point another way, white ignorance, willful hermeneutical ignorance, and contributory injustice are *done by* members of dominant groups. When members of dominant social groups perpetrate white ignorance, willful hermeneutical ignorance, or contributory injustice, they produce and maintain deficits and distortions in the collective hermeneutical resource that give rise to instances of hermeneutical injustice. By contrast, hermeneutical injustice is something that *happens to* members of oppressed and marginalized social groups because the collective hermeneutical resource is deficient or distorted.

Other phenomena also play a role in this process. For example, speakers subject to testimonial injustice are disbelieved because hearers judge them to be untrustworthy because of their social identity (Fricker 2007). If a speaker's testimony is not believed because she is a woman, or Black, or working class, she is thereby prevented from filling gaps or eliminating distortions in the collective hermeneutical resource. Similarly, testimonial quieting is a phenomenon whereby

individuals are not recognized as knowers due to negative stereotypes about them qua members of a social group, e.g., black women (Dotson 2011, 242). If a speaker is not recognized as a knower, then she will be unable to contribute testimony (because her testimony is not solicited) that could eliminate deficits and distortions in the collective hermeneutical resource. The same goes for testimonial smothering (Dotson 2011, 244), which occurs when a speaker suppresses their own testimony out of the reasonable expectation that it will not be properly understood by hearers (e.g., via willful hermeneutical ignorance or contributory injustice). When speakers smother their testimony in this way, they are thereby denied the opportunity to eliminate or mitigate deficits and distortions in the collective hermeneutical resource through her testimony.

Moreover, it is likely that deficits and distortions in the collective hermeneutical resource, in addition to giving rise to instances of hermeneutical injustice, can also reproduce white ignorance, willful hermeneutical ignorance, contributory injustice, testimonial injustice, testimonial quieting, and testimonial smothering. If the collective hermeneutical resource is deficient and distorted, then it will provide a conceptual and terminological bulwark against alternative interpretations of social reality. For example, behaviors that are now called sexual harassment were previously called “flirting.” Thus, before the term “sexual harassment” was created and achieved uptake, women who refused to describe their experiences of being sexually harassed as “flirting” were likely to confront willful hermeneutical ignorance, contributory injustice, and testimonial smothering.

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have developed an alternative definition of hermeneutical injustice. On my view, someone is subject to hermeneutical injustice when they are unjustly thwarted in their attempts to understand or communicate the nature or normative significance of their social experiences because the collective hermeneutical resource is deficient or distorted. Moreover, I defended the idea that the collective hermeneutical resource is a structure comprised of concepts, terms, and inferential relations among them. Although instances of hermeneutical injustice can arise from gaps in the collective hermeneutical resource, I argued that hermeneutical injustice is also caused by distortions in the collective hermeneutical resource. On my view, the collective hermeneutical resource is distorted when the terms and concepts that comprise it are inferentially related in ways that are invalid or inductively weak. When the collective hermeneutical resource is distorted, hermeneutical injustice arises not from a failure of concept possession but from a failure of concept application. Finally, I distinguished hermeneutical injustice from white ignorance, willful hermeneutical ignorance, and contributory injustice. I argued that white ignorance, willful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice produce and maintain deficits and distortions in the collective hermeneutical resource, whereas hermeneutical injustice is produced by those deficits and distortions.

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